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ABSTRACT

Education was designed to prepare young people for the adult world, to enable them to find some degree of success in whatever they choose to do. It is thought if that educators can teach young people to read and write, they will succeed. But the primary reason people lose jobs is not because they do not have basic skills but because they cannot get along with one another in the workplace. The real problems faced by students include: low self-esteem; inability to communicate clearly; inability to deal with stress; problems with handling anger and conflict; lack of opportunity to determine options and make choices; lack of understanding that one's behaviors entails consequences; feelings of unrealistic expectations and limited potential; and lack of gender equity in parental behavior. One program that has had significant success in combating these social problems is described. Called "The Dynamics of Relationships," and originally piloted in Washington, D.C., the course allows young people to develop: (1) a strong and secure sense of self-worth; (2) more effective communication skills; (3) the ability to cope constructively with disappointment, loss, and rejection; and (4) clearer and more realistic expectations about their future roles in life. In summary, teaching students to read and write without also teaching them to function as social beings does not make sense. The educational system and society need major reforms. The new "three Rs" of the '90s must be respect, responsibility, and relationships. (ABL)

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If I Don't Love Me, Who Will?
Developing Self-Esteem in Youth

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IF I DON'T LOVE ME, WHO WILL?
DEVELOPING SELF-ESTEEM IN YOUTH

There's a story about a little town with a river. Up town there was a bridge across the water, but the people downstream didn't visit upstream very often. Recently, the people downstream have noticed a lot of people seem to be falling in the river upstream and by the time they get downstream, some drown. The towns people got together to figure out what was happening and to see what they could do about the problem. After all, the town wasn't very big and they couldn't afford to lose many people. So the city council and school board got together to brainstorm. They were so pleased with the solutions they came up with. They decided to require everyone to take CPR and swimming lessons so they could help if anyone fell in the river and anyone in the water could swim to the shore when the current was strong. Well it seems they saved a few lives, but still some were drowning. So they had another town meeting. This time they decided to build a hospital on the shore of the river. This way they could pull any victims from the water, take them immediately to the hospital and be able use all the high tech life-saving equipment. But still some died. They were becoming desperate. The population of the town was dwindling.This time they decided to put rafts, inner tubes, tow lines and boats into the river so people could pull themselves to safety. Unfortunately, a few still drowned. No one knew what to do.

Well, if the people downstream had just visited upstream to investigate why people were falling in the river, they would have discovered that the old bridge was falling apart. It was so rickety that whenever people walked across, someone inevitably fell in.

That story is not unlike the structure of our school system today. Some educators are so busy setting up ***"crisis-intervention"*** programs that they don't bother to look at what they can do to prevent the problems. Oddly, they haven't even identified the real problems. They keep saying that drugs, teen pregnancy or suicide, violence, school drop-outs are the problems. They're not! They're simply symptoms of much more serious problems. And we keep putting bandaids on these wounds—open wounds hiding a deeper infection. Bandaids called "crisis-intervention." If a doctor identified the wrong disease and treated it, there is a strong possibility the patient would die. Many patients in our educational system are dying—physically and figuratively.

Administrators think if we keep talking about drugs—their danger and their harm—kids will stop using them. Kids already know all about drugs and they still use them. They also know that if they have sex, they might get pregnant or get a disease that may be fatal, yet they continue to have sex in record numbers. Recent studies show that 50% of 15-year olds have had sexual intercourse, as compared with 10% in the 1960's. Schools implement sex education programs—which are really not sex education at all—for 6-9 weeks and think they will not only change students' attitudes, but their values and behavior as well. They think if you talk about sexually transmitted diseases and explain the birth process, kids will stop having sex or at least will use precautions.

In the scheme of things, education was designed to prepare young people for the adult world—to enable them to find some degree of success in whatever they choose to do. We think if we can just teach them to read and write, they'll succeed. But the reason people lose jobs is not because they don't have basic skills. The number one reason they can't get along on the job is because of personality problems or a bad attitude. Yet we do nothing to prepare young people to get along with one another in the workplace. We teach little about respect and less about self-respect. Furthermore, the primary reason people don't get jobs they interview for—even if well qualified—is poor communication skills. Most people simply don't know how to express themselves. We don't teach that in our schools, either.

"Children Are The Future, Teach Them Wisely."

Think about it. From the moment we are born to the day we die, we are in relationships. I'm not talking about sexual or romantic relationships. Every moment we live, we are relating to someone. If you have parents—and all of us do or did at one time—a brother or sister, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, peers, colleagues, bosses, employees or even a pet, you're having a relationship. with that person. And if you can't get along with those people, what happens? What kind of life do you have? That's why everyday in the United States:

- 988 AMERICAN CHILDREN ARE ABUSED;
- 2,989 CHILDREN SEE THEIR PARENTS DIVORCED;
- 1,099 TEENAGERS HAVE ABORTIONS;
- 1,287 TEENAGERS GIVE BIRTH;
- 110 BABIES DIE BEFORE THEIR FIRST BIRTHDAY;
- 27 CHILDREN DIE BECAUSE OF POVERTY;
- 5 SCHOOL-AGE YOUTHS ARE MURDERED;
- 5 TEENS COMMIT SUICIDE.[1]

So what are the real problems? And what are schools—and society's— responsibilities in solving them. So many of the problems faced by adults—divorce, spousal abuse, inability to hold a job, etc—are very much the same issues faced by youth. There's a saying that goes, **"If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always gotten."** Be assured that if the problems we experience as young people are not resolved, we take them into adulthood with us and the pattern continues on.

THE REAL PROBLEMS:

I. Low self-esteem

Two out of three Americans suffer from low self-esteem. Studies indicate that when children enter school, 80% feel good about who they are; by 5th grade, the number drops to 20%; by the time students are ready to graduate—if they're still in school—only 5% feel they are worthwhile or have potential for success. What happens between those years? What changes a wholesome self-image to a doubting, unworthy sense of self?

Could it be we live in a negative society—one in which we hear at ever turn. *"No;" "You did it wrong," "Can't you ever do anything right?" "You'll never make anything out of your life."* How often do we hear *"I love you;" "Thank You;" "You did a great job;" "I'm really proud of you"; "Keep up the good work"?* Unfortunately too many of us continually get negative conditioning. The end result is a poor self-image. A low self-esteem contributes to the abuse of drugs and alcohol, teen pregnancy, suicide, violence, academic failure and almost all other destructive behaviors.

II. Communication

Another problem is our inability to communicate clearly—to make ourselves heard and understood. Too many people hold in their feelings. The results are often deadly. People end up with all kinds of physical ailments such as heart attacks, ulcers and even mental break-downs. Worse yet, they explode and end up in prison or even dead. Along the way are all the victims—the recipients of verbal or physical abuse.What about the less serious consequences of our inability to communicate on the job or in relationships—not not only intimate ones—but all types of interactions that people have with one another?

[1] Children's Defense Fund

III. Coping Skills

How many people experience stress and pressure on a regular basis— whether at work, home, in relationships or all of the above. Both are a normal occurrence—a daily event in our lives. Some try to fight it, but the majority let stress get the best of them. Where or when are we taught to handle this daily phenomena? At home? At school?

IV. Anger and Conflict

Anger and conflict also are inevitable. Anger can creep in from something as innocuous as stubbing your toe, getting cut-off in traffic to something more serious such as someone cheating you or mistreating you. Conflict can and does occur whenever two people have a different point of view, which is highly likely in a world full of people from different ethnic, racial, religious and familial backgrounds. When people from so broad a span of age and cultural orientation try to coexist and people of different sexes try to blend together to form one, they can't possibly see things the same way. So how do we learn to hande anger? Who teaches us about people's differences?

V. Options and Choices

How do we learn that life offers choices—that we have options about how to conduct our lives or what happens to us in the process. We learn by having the opportunity to make decisions. Unfortunately, many young people don't have that opportunity very often because most adults continually tell them what to do. We tell them how to, when to and what to. We ask that young people be responsible. Yet. we rarely give them the chance to learn from their own experiences. The one thing most youth want from adults is.....trust. They want to be trusted. We ask them to be trustworthy and then with every chance we get, we make decisions for them—in the name of expediency, knowing what's best and even love.

VI. Consequences

Another thing we usually don't learn abouttuntil it is too late is that our behavior has consequences. We learn what works and what doesn't by experimenting...by making decisions —sometimes, even the wrong decisions. In the name of protection and in the guise of adulthood, we attempt to spare our children from negative consequences and we end up taking away their judgment about what is right or wrong—what works and what doesn't.

VII. Expectations

Where do we learn about the roles we will play and what is expected of us in our lives? We learn from an array of sources. parents. teachers. peers. the Media. Because we can't control the media, we allow them to give alluring messages about destructive behaviors in a way that makes them not only inviting, but acceptable. Neon lights blink over and over again saying....sex, drugs, violence. Moral adults stand in one corner telling youth all the things that are wrong. Movies, TV, rock videos, rap, or books tell them those things are not only okay, but if you don't do them you aren't cool.

Parents start telling us when we're tiny babies all the things we're supposed to do or the things we'll never be able to do. From the time we are born we're programmed about who we are and who we are supposed to be. It may have nothing to do with our talent, abilities or desires. Often parents discipline with negative conditioning and reinforcement. Limitations rather than possibilities are stressed. Usually, parents are well meaning and loving and do want what's best for their kids, but often they're simply passing on what was "expected" of them.

Parents and teachers often discipline punitively. They punish kids for doing things that they perceive as wrong rather than praise them for the things they do right. There are many nurturing teachers,

but others criticize, put down, discount and negate children's feelings. This behavior certainly sends messages to kids about who they are, what they can expect and what their potential and capabilities are. Consequently, too many young people grow up with "self-fulfilled negative prophecies" which result in unrealistic expectations and limited potential.

VIII. Gender Roles

We treat boys and girls differently from the day they are born. He's wrapped in blue and she in pink. She's held close, he's held like a football. He gets toys that encourage creativity (chemistry sets), aggression (guns, war toys), competition (sporting equipment). She gets dolls, more dolls, cleaning equipment (vacuum, brooms) cooking utensils, make-up kits and jewelry which encourages nurturing, care-taking behavior, emphasizes physical attributes and dependency. Nine-year-old Johnny goes out to play, starts across the street and dad says, *"Be careful and be home by dinner."* His twin sister, Judy goes out and days says, *"Where do you think you're going, young lady?"* When she says *"I'm going out to play like Johnny. I'll be careful and I'll be home by dinner, too,"* dad says, *"Oh no, you won't. You're not going out to play by yourself. It's too dangerous"*. When Judy says, *"Well how come Johnny can go?"* dad says either, *"Well, he's a boy"* or *"You're a girl."* What message does she get? One that says boys are capable, trustworthy and independent and girls aren't.

It may very well be that because we raise boys and girls to think, feel, hear and speak differently that divorce, spousal abuse, rape and date rape are inevitable. As long as we teach boys and girls different messages about what is right and wrong, the gender gap will continue to widen, and relationships between men and women will continue to self-destruct. Maybe we shouldn't be so surprised that marriages don't work and violence toward women is on the increase. Girls sometimes do give mixed messages to boys who read them inappropriately, or think they don't mean what they say, because girls often aren't taught to believe in themselves, their rights or their potential. Many girls say things they don't mean and do things they don't want to do because they think boys won't like them if they don't. They forget about liking themselves.

We think because the women's movement has become so powerful that much has changed. Statistics bear out that little has changed. We may need to rethink the way we raise our children—the way we treat boy and girl students differently—even though we think we really are being equitable. We need to promote androgyny. We need to help boys and girls unite their masculine and feminine sides. We need to teach little boys that it is okay to be gentle and nurturing and that crying doesn't make you less of a man but more of a human being, and we need to teach little girls that it is okay to be assertive, self-sufficient and independent—that a real man won't be threatened or intimidated by her success and strength.

THE CONSEQUENCES

- When you don't feel good about yourself: 1)you don't care what you do to yourself; 2)you don't care what you put into your body; 3)you don't care what you say or do to others. You only can think about immediate gratification even if it means hurting someone else.
- If you can't communicate your feelings, hopes and fears: you hold back expressing yourself until you get either physically ill, emotionally traumatized or explode.
- If you can't handle stress and pressure—which are inevitable then you may act out your frustration in destructive ways.
- If you don't know how to handle the everyday occurrences of anger and conflict , violence or abuse are often the results.
- If you don't know that you have choices or recognize your options, you often make poor decisions.
- If you have unrealistic expectations about your life or future, you may not set achievable goals.
- If you can't get along with people of the opposite sex, those you live with or work with, then your relationships may be doomed to failure.

What do you do if these are the inevitable consequences???? You get drunk or high, you overeat, you abuse yourself or others—sometimes violently—you look for someone to love you and fill up the void that's inside, you have sex to hold onto someone so you can feel worthy of love, you get depressed and attempt suicide, or worse yet even succeed. Kids and adults alike handle problems this way.

So what are the real problems and whose responsibility are they? Should our schools and our teachers have to deal with the affective domain? Should they have to teach social skills? The real question is do they really have a choice? Teaching kids to read and write without also teaching them to function as social beings doesn't make sense. And it doesn't work. If children are in pain—struggling with rejection, loss, failure or disappointment—they don't, won't and can't learn. And, what good is learning to read and write if you are an alcoholic, a drug addict or, worse, a drug dealer. What good is teaching history and math to young people who, once out of school, beat up or abuse their children or spouses, can't stay married or can't hold on to a job or can't even get a job assuming they can get one in the first place.

Students from around the country have shared their vision of what they want schools to be like. They say they want:

1) an environment that is supportive, positive and helps to uncover their potential;
1) an arena to talk where they can air their feelings, their hopes and fears and talk about things relative to their lives right now;
2) nurturing, nonjudgemental teachers;
3) every student in the class to be their support system;
4) trust and respect; and
5) an opportunity to learn constructive ways of handling the crisis in their lives when it occurs (i.e. decision-making and conflict-resolution skills)

ONE PROGRAM THAT WORKS

One such program that offers kids some of these alternatives is called **"The Dynamics of Relationships,"** a program designed to take a *preventive* approach to combat many of today's social problems such as ***substance abuse, teen pregnancy, school dropouts, suicides,*** and other disruptive, and self-destructive behaviors. It was originally piloted in the Washington, DC schools many years ago and is now used in schools, hospitals, treatment centers and universities across North America. It was created to help all young people develop positive attitudes and behavior while learning to take charge of their own lives and their own success. The core of the curricula is teaching young people the social skills they need to make healthy and appropriate choices about their lives now and in the future so that the need for substance abuse, gang activity, dropping out or other self-destructive behavior is no longer even an option they consider.

The course offers young people an arena in which to openly discuss the personal issues that so many young people are struggling with so they could learn to safely cope with their problems. The course's objectives are to allow young people to develop:

- a strong and secure sense of self-worth that will help them not only to feel empowered, but to **say no to drugs, alcohol, gang involvement, negative peer influence** and other harmful or self-destructive behaviors.
- more effective communication skills that will allow them to not only interact with others better, but also to **handle anger and conflict on a safe level.**
- the ability to **cope with disappointment, loss and rejection constructively.**
- clearer and more **realistic expectations** about their future roles in life.

Youth who participate in the program report that the **"Dynamics of Relationships"** text helps them solve day-to-day problems and helps them become more aware of their own as well as others'

feelings. Schools implementing the program report positive results—particularly in the area of increased self-esteem. In Woodstown, New Jersey, where they implemented the program a number of years ago, their school psychologist wrote me and said, ***"Without exception, responses have been extremely favorable and reflective of growth in personality, maturity and self-esteem. There is little doubt the program offers an extremely valuable opportunity for youth to develop effective adjustment and coping skills, improve dramatically in the area of self-image and learn to clarify their values."***

The feedback from both students and teachers alike are profound. Students in the program learn that there is no problem that can't be resolved or at least handled safely. They no longer think suicide. They also learn that it is okay to ask for help when they need it. They no longer think violence because they learn there are ways to handle conflict whereby both people come out winners. **One young man in the DC school program said,*"if we could get every kid in Washington to take this class, we could stop the killing!!"*** For the first time, they say they are beginning to like themselves.They go to school more, fight with their parents less, and most importantly, say ***they are now less involved with drugs***—all of which they attribute directly to "**The Dynamics Relationships** experience. Teachers notice a high rate of attendance and participation by students not commonly found in other classrooms. Many say that the program has contributed to keeping their students in school.

Though not all teachers working with the program are trained, I recommend that they participate in five-day in-service. This training allows them to achieve the following:

- ***Facilitate"The Dynamics of Relationships" class;***
- ***Turn the classroom into a caring environment that supports students;***
- ***Create a positive atmosphere that invites students to attend classes, participate and ultimately succeed;***
- ***Learn to motivate students;***
- ***Reduce substance abuse, discipline problems, violence and vandalism;***
- ***Teach students how to develop and maintain their own self-esteem, as well as teach effective communication and coping [survival] skills.***

This hands-on training elicits a high level of involvement and excitement on the part of participants who say they not only benefit personally, but experience immediate tangible benefits in the classroom in terms of increased rapport with the students and noticeable increase in a positive learning atmosphere, as well. They leave the training a cohesive, motivated group with a renewed sense of commitment and the skills necessary to translate that commitment in the classroom.

There are many other good programs out there, but they are only good if implemented. If educators continue to resist and if our educational system and our society doesn't recognize the need for major reforms, then we'll continue in the same direction—more people will drown in the river, more patients will die and the social ills plaguing this country will run rampant. We do need to become a *"kinder and gentler nation."* The new three R's of the 90's must be **Respect, Responsibility and Relationships.**

For more information about this program contact: Patricia Kramer; Equal Partners, 3371 Beaverwood Lane, Silver Spring, Maryland 20906, or call (301)871-9665.